

Toki wa ima

A Senior Honors Thesis

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ABSTRACT

The year 1582 saw the downfall of one of Japan's three great unifiers, Oda Nobunaga (b. 1534) at the hands of his own retainer, Akechi Mitsuhide (1528?-1582), and paved the way for the rise of those generals who filled the power vacuum created at Nobunaga's death, Toyotomi Hideyoshi (1536-1598) and Tokugawa Ieyasu (1543-1616). The rebellion of Akechi in the so-called Incident at Honnōji (Honnōji no hen 本能時の変) has sparked cultural and historical interest in both Japan and the West for the past four centuries, in part due to the fragmented and difficult to corroborate accounts that have been authored regarding this revolt. Sources contemporary to the Incident at Honnōji give at once vague and intriguing explanations of both the actions of Akechi and his lieutenants and the manner in which their actions were perceived—and perhaps more tantalizingly, lead the reader to few firm conclusions. As one of the most enigmatic events in Japanese history, the Incident at Honnōji is fertile ground for embellishment, political appropriation, storytelling, and popular culture, and bears its fruit in the form of competing theories and tales.

This enigma of Honnōji has indeed sparked debate over the exact actions taken by, and the motives of Akechi, and the reader cannot help but feel drawn to investigate the origins of these theories. Upon examination of the primary sources and a representative selection of secondary materials, one finds a hall of mirrors constructed about him as conflicting accounts and interpretations fail to coalesce into a systematic, solid truth about the impetus behind Akechi's assassination of Oda. Honnōji being one of the watershed moments in the history of the feudal period in Japan, it is all the more fascinating that its *casus belli* is shrouded in mystery.

Various writers in both Japanese and English have produced treatises on the Incident at Honnōji. In attempting to outline the theories and suggestions that have been made about its particulars, one must turn a critical eye to each author's research methodology, political or personal background, and to the cultural climate of the day. Beginning with documents produced shortly after Honnōji, and proceeding through the Tokugawa (1603-1868), Meiji (1868-1912), and modern periods, I intend to present a brief analysis of representative works that treat the incident, focusing particularly on tracing the development of each theory or representation and its basis in earlier source materials.

Starting with a problematization of the source perhaps most closely contemporary to the Honnōji affair, Ōta Gyūichi's *Shinchō-kō ki* (*The Chronicle of Lord Nobunaga*), I will identify this document as what may be considered the “door left open” for subsequent speculation. Examining Akechi's *renga* (linked verse) poetry which may be read as intimating his intent to rebel, I will provide a possible interpretation of his lines, and of their implications. I will then turn to other sources roughly contemporary to the incident, including letters written about Honnōji and Oda by the Jesuit missionary Luis Fróis, and a document written by an Akechi officer who claimed to have been at Honnōji, Honjō Sōemon. Next, I will discuss the most common theories on what motivated Akechi to assassinate his lord, basing my analyses on the commentary and research by such modern Japanese scholars as Takayanagi Mitsutoshi, Kuwata Tadachika, and Taniguchi Katsuhiro. Finally, I will briefly discuss recent adaptations that depict the Honnōji incident and relations between Akechi and Oda, including the 2006 PlayStation 2 title *Sengoku Musō 2* (released internationally as “Samurai Warriors 2”), which contains player-controlled reenactments of the interaction between Akechi and Oda, and gives the player the opportunity to take control of both personas in their final confrontation at Honnōji. Commentary

on and analysis of the treatments of Akechi and Oda in the 2009 Japan Broadcasting Corporation production *Tenchijin* (“Virtues of the Peerless Ruler”), a historical fiction drama based on the events of the Sengoku (1467-1573) and Azuchi-Momoyama (1568-1603) periods will round out discussion on modern adaptations.

I will aim to explore the motivations and trends behind these myriad stances on the Honnōji affair, and to leave readers with a more comprehensive understanding of the incident through exposition of multiple sources from across Japanese literary and cultural history. Study of the incident serves as a stepping stone to further questions about the nature of how historical works are drafted—what is the difference, if any, between the exegesis of history through prose and through poetry or fiction? Drawing on such authors as Hayden White and Richard Bauman, I will briefly utilize the narrative of Honnōji to illustrate broader points about some of the challenges that writing history poses.

While the contemporary historical sources, themselves occasionally conflicted and hard to corroborate, aid the observant and critical reader in attempting to reconstruct the actual circumstances and events related to Honnōji, the modern fictional adaptations of the narrative serve two roles. Naturally, these adaptations serve to entertain—but in doing so, we have a window through which we can view the values and historical contexts of the periods in question. In what light are Akechi’s actions viewed across the flow of Japanese history, in both scholarly and creative contexts? And what trope might Akechi have been assigned in the grand context of Japanese literary figures? Through studying varying accounts of the same event—from historical chronicles to fictional re-creations—we may cultivate a more comprehensive understanding of the Incident at Honnōji as it is perceived over time.

As this is a watershed moment that affected the course of Japanese political, military, and cultural history, it is worthwhile to turn a critical eye to the sources that give accounts of its particulars. The mystery surrounding Akechi Mitsuhide's motivations, the timing of his actions, and the abrupt end to the military rule of Oda Nobunaga are subjects that compel the student of Japan to further study. And in Akechi's words, *toki wa ima*—the “time is now”—to turn our attention to the journey he has taken, from Honnōji in the sixteenth century to PlayStation 2 and television in the twenty-first.

Dedicated to my friends and family, who have supported me in every way

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
Abstract	ii
Dedication	vi
Acknowledgments	vii
 Chapters:	
1. Introduction	1
2. The Age of the Country at War: Japan's Political and Military Status, 1467-1603	5
3. <i>Toki wa ima</i> : Seeds of Rebellion, and Problematizing <i>The Chronicle of Lord Nobunaga</i>	10
<i>Toki wa ima</i>	12
Ōta Gyūichi's Reticence: Commentary and the "Lyrical Fallacy"	16
4. Contemporary Sources: Jesuit Letters and Other Writings	18
Luis Fróis	19
"Honjō Sōemon oboegaki"	22
5. Theories: Ambition, Vengeance, and Further Speculation	25
For Ambition	25
For Vengeance	27
The "Puppeteer" Theory	29
6. Modern Interpretations: <i>Tenchijin</i> and <i>Sengoku Musō 2</i>	32
7. Conclusions: History as Narrative and Akechi, the Failed Noble Rebel	35
"What Is History?"	36
Akechi, the Failed Noble Rebel	41
The Time Is Now	45
Bibliography	47

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

ときは今
雨が下知る
五月哉

*toki wa ima
ame ga shita shiru
satsuki ka na*

Akechi Mitsuhide 明智光秀, twenty-seventh day of the fifth month, 1582

In the one hundred and thirty-five years between the start of the Ōnin War in 1467, which was a conflict that arose over a shogunal succession dispute between rival military houses, and the establishment of the Tokugawa shogunate in 1603, which brought relative peace, prosperity, security, and law to Japan's war-torn provinces, the nation of Japan was engaged in unceasing civil wars. It is not without reason that the period from 1467 to 1568 is known as the *sengoku jidai* (Period of the Country at War). Great warlords, utilizing their political and military acumen, struggled with each other, and with the decaying central administrative authority embodied by the Kyoto nobility, in an effort to expand their own lands and influence to levels previously unseen in Japanese history. The stories of these warlords, remembered to Japanese history for their ruthlessness, their honor, their glorious successes, and their magnificent defeats, continue to be transmitted in the present era through print, but also in comparatively new forms of media and entertainment, such as television, video games, and websites dedicated entirely to the stories surrounding these legendary figures.

Of these figures, one man stands out amongst the others for these very traits—variously described as a “callous brute” and as “highly esteemed and venerated by all.” Oda Nobunaga (1534-1582), the first of the “Three Great Unifiers” of Japan, is a figure whose political, military,

and cultural exploits have spawned perhaps more popular literature and more interest to date than any other *sengoku* warlord. His rise to power from relatively humble beginnings, his astonishing military successes, his sometimes frightening wrath and force of personality, and his ultimate mysterious death have made him a figure about whom not only history enthusiasts, but the average reader has shown a remarkable interest.

But it is the mysterious circumstances surrounding Oda's death that have generated some of the most exciting and compelling research centered on the Age of the Country at War. Assassinated by a disaffected retainer, the man who quickly rose to the *de facto* utter pinnacle of power in Japan was cut down before he could realize his dream of uniting the nation and becoming master of all he surveyed. And if Oda Nobunaga can be considered one of the most prominent personalities of his age, his assassin, Akechi Mitsuhide (1528?-1582), may truly be called the most enigmatic figure in the *sengoku jidai*.

Study of Akechi Mitsuhide and his betrayal of Oda Nobunaga at the Incident at Honnōji (Honnōji no hen 本能時の変) in 1582, and speculation as to Akechi's motives, exact maneuvers, and intentions reveal a singularly enticing mystery, as the lack of contemporary commentary, and particularly the absence of extant works authored by Akechi, leaves any concrete exposition of these circumstances no more than a "hall of mirrors." Indeed, critical readers are left without grounds for of a final verdict on what transpired at Honnōji.

Those contemporary sources that remain extant are often difficult to corroborate, and should rightfully be viewed with a careful eye regarding authorial intent, and regarding the manner in which their narratives have been transmitted thereafter. As with other stories of famous persons throughout history, the facts of Akechi Mitsuhide's life and of the Incident at Honnōji have metamorphosed in the four hundred years since the event, creating a spectrum of

works spanning from the mostly factual to the highly stylized and fictionalized. Such works inevitably suggest particular tropes and character archetypes, and I will briefly discuss the possibility of Akechi as an archetypical “failed noble rebel.” As well as serving as an example of this kind of historical and literary metastasis, the developing narrative about Akechi suggests certain questions regarding the nature of history and the nature of what is fact, and what is truth in the eyes of readers across the lifetime of the narrative.

In order to best describe the winding path Akechi Mitsuhide’s narrative has taken, from contemporary documents and works, through competing theories and scholarly interest, and finally arriving at the present-day era of games and graphics, I will first begin with a general overview of the state of the Japanese political and military arena in the years prior to the Incident at Honnōji, including a brief description of Oda Nobunaga’s rise to power, and his subsequent military campaigns across central and western Japan. I will then analyze a primary source document, Ōta Gyūichi’s *The Chronicle of Lord Nobunaga*, which details Akechi’s rebellion and Oda’s final moments, and serves as the most important work authored by a contemporary chronicler of the Oda regime. Problematizing this document, I argue that its refrain from commentary on Akechi’s motives and its lack of further explanation of his actions serves as the “door left open” for speculation and theorizing lasting to the present day.

Following this analysis, I will turn to both historical chronicles and literary works that are contemporary to the Incident at Honnōji, some of which speculate on the impetus behind Akechi’s betrayal of Oda. Of particular interest are the writings of a Jesuit missionary under the patronage of Oda, whose letters and records provide a unique first-hand look into Oda’s leadership, his relationship with Akechi, and also into Akechi’s personality and character. These works, chronologically close to the events of Honnōji, provide a foundation for further

speculation, as well as mythologizing, which came later in the form of popular literature and some of the scholarly research in the Edo (1603-1868) and Meiji (1868-1912) periods. And upon these building blocks, modern scholarship and renditions of Akechi's rebellion have introduced a new generation of young minds to Japan's history and heritage through video games, television programs, and online resources, the latest development in the four hundred year history of the Incident at Honnōji. After treating two particular examples of modern retellings of Akechi's story, I will conclude with thoughts on the nature of history, and on some of the dynamics underlying how stories develop and change over time.

CHAPTER 2

THE AGE OF THE COUNTRY AT WAR: JAPAN'S POLITICAL AND MILITARY STATUS, 1467-1603

The central military government embodied in the Muromachi or Ashikaga Shogunate (1336-1573), born out of the rebellion of the Minamoto-lineage general Ashikaga Takauji (1305-1358) against his Hōjō family overlords, itself ended in rebellion. As such, the early Muromachi period is a fitting starting point for a discussion of uprising, upheaval, and revolt in the *sengoku* years. The Muromachi period was characterized by a lively and varied flourishing of the arts, and expansion and codification of a new administrative system; it may be considered the liveliest period in Japanese history.¹ While the period cannot be characterized as peaceful by any means—according to George Sansom, not a year passed that was not marked by some sort of uprising or military conflict, including a fifty-year succession dispute from 1336-1392 known as the Period of the Southern and Northern Courts (*nanboku-chō jidai* 南北朝時代). The reign of the Ashikaga shogunate was remarkable for an unprecedented increase in agricultural production, the growth of towns and villages, and for a general increase in trade and commerce.

Concomitant to the increase in agriculture and commerce was a decrease in the power of the central administration, as control over revenue shifted from the lapsed taxation processes of the Shogunate to the increasingly powerful warrior families outside the capital. It was in this unwilling and unwitting transfer of power away from the Ashikaga government that the seeds of

¹ George Sansom, *A History of Japan, 1334-1615* (Stanford, CA: Stanford Univ. Press, 1961), v.

another great conflict would arise. With the increase in provincial warlords' power came an ever-greater willingness to defy the Ashikaga-appointed constables and governors who had held hereditary power over their provinces since Takauji's time.

This increase in the warrior families' power, combined with the ineffectual leadership of the shogun Yoshimasa, led to open war between two rival military houses, the Yamana and Hosokawa, in 1467 over the selection of Yoshimasa's successor. The armies of the Yamana and Hosokawa fought in and around the capital of Kyoto for the better part of the next decade, the skirmishes continuing even beyond the deaths of both families' patriarchs in 1473. This conflict, termed the Ōnin War, lasted until 1477, when the last of the Yamana and Hosokawa supporters deserted the capital, leaving it in ashes, and the Ashikaga government in tatters. What central authority remained was held by the Hosokawa, and through puppet shoguns, they maintained a tenuous hold on the capital area until they were ousted in 1558 by their own subordinates, the Miyoshi and Matsunaga families.

The term *gekokujō* (下剋上, roughly “the subordinate overcomes the overlord”) is used to describe the phenomenon of established daimyo and warrior families being overthrown by their subordinate or retainer clans across Japan during the early part of the *sengoku* era: the Miyoshi removed the Hosokawa from power, and in turn, the Matsunaga clashed with the Miyoshi over control of the capital provinces. These isolated, private wars between masters and their rebellious subjects, initially contained to localized struggles, allowed ambitious warlords to take control not only of the provinces once held by their overlords, but of surrounding areas. In doing so, the more powerful warrior houses ousted minor families or incorporated them through marriage, alliance, or conquest.

By the mid-1500s, the civil wars raging across Japan between newly-empowered warrior houses, absent a strong central government to pacify any one region of the country, had left some families in strong positions to attempt a unification campaign. Generals such as Takeda of Kai (present-day Yamanashi Prefecture), Uesugi of Echigo (Niigata prefecture), and Imagawa of Suruga (Shizuoka prefecture) all commanded armies of tens of thousands of warriors, and waxed nostalgic for the bygone era of imperial commissions to chastise their enemies.² Regardless of the status of the Ashikaga shogunate, the emperor was still considered the font of authority and honor, and to be supported by the emperor in one's military campaigns could be tantamount to the establishment of a new shogunate or central government.

But for most of the *sengoku* generals, reasons political as well as geographic prevented them from achieving their glorious reunification dreams backed by Imperial authority. Takeda and Uesugi, locked in a decades-long struggle with one another, would not be able to achieve a breakout and claim decisive victory; generals in the west of Japan like Ōuchi were preoccupied with securing their home provinces, and any march to the capital would have risked trouble at home. Of the powerful warlords in 1560, only Imagawa Yoshimoto (1519-1560) had the military and geographic means of attempting a march on the capital, and this he did in the sixth month of that year, foreseeing little resistance along the sea road through the provinces of Mikawa, Owari, Mino, and Ōmi.

He was put to a halt in dramatic fashion by a young lord, Oda Nobunaga, who had waged a steady campaign to unify Owari province (parts of Aichi prefecture) under his rule, and presently defeated Imagawa in an overwhelming victory—it was said that Oda's men numbered no more than three thousand, whereas Imagawa commanded more than twenty-five thousand.

² Ibid., 274-275.

This 1560 Battle of Okehazama (*Okehazama no tatakai* 桶狭間の戦い) eliminated the Imagawa family as a contender for national power. Yoshimoto was killed in battle, and his lands fell to a retainer, Matsudaira Motoyasu (the future third unifier of Japan, Tokugawa Ieyasu [1543-1616]).

Oda quickly attacked and subdued Mino Province (Gifu prefecture), and swept through Ise and Ōmi provinces (parts of Wakayama and Shiga prefectures) on his way to the capital, arriving in late 1568. Placing an Ashikaga survivor, Yoshiaki (the brother of the late shogun Yoshiteru, killed in 1565) on the shogunal seat of power, Oda consolidated his power in the provinces surrounding the capital, defeating the powerful Azai and Asakura families to the northeast, and repeatedly battling the religious warriors of the Ishiyama Honganji temple south of the capital. By 1581, Oda had defeated all immediate rivals in the twenty-odd provinces he laid claim to, had constructed one of the grandest castles in Japan at Azuchi, at the outskirts of the capital, and began to contemplate his next moves.

He planned an invasion of the southern island of Shikoku, ordering one of his sons to prepare an army; he also ordered Akechi Mitsuhide and Toyotomi Hideyoshi (1536-1598), two of his lieutenants, to proceed west to face the Mōri family, successors and usurpers of the former western power, the Ōuchi. Leaving his castle at Azuchi, Oda proceeded to Honnōji, a temple in the capital, where he took up residence, entertaining guests and overseeing the efforts of his western push.³ Oda took few troops with him, feeling secure at the center of his power base—and this was to be his undoing.

³ George Elison, *Deus Destroyed: The Image of Christianity in Early Modern Japan* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Univ. Press, 1988), 82. Elison writes, “[Oda’s] purpose in coming to the Honnōji was not that of the warrior but rather that of the connoisseur of the major *elegantiae* of the age, the tea ceremony and the various *objets d’art* appurtenant to it. He had invited famous teamen and court nobles to attend at a sumptuous display of his precious utensils--a list of the most valuable thirty-eight exists to the present, dated the day prior to the disaster. Nobunaga’s tea party proved a very expensive diversion. He entertained his guests late into the night with talk of his dreams of the past and designs for the future, until the irruption of Akechi’s soldiers ended the pleasantries.”

At the beginning of the sixth month of 1582, Akechi Mitsuhide turned his forces back towards the capital and surrounded the Honnōji, where Oda committed suicide, his body disappearing amongst the fires set in the temple.⁴ After the destruction of Oda, Akechi moved on to take Azuchi, but upon meeting a newly-returned Toyotomi Hideyoshi, who had force-marched his army back from the Mōri front upon hearing the news of Oda's death, met his end at the Battle of Yamazaki (*Yamazaki no tatakai* 山崎の戦い). Rather than Akechi Mitsuhide succeeding Oda Nobunaga as ruler of central and eastern-central Japan, it was Toyotomi Hideyoshi who avenged his lord's death and solidified his own position as the leading general in 1582.

Toyotomi Hideyoshi's campaigns after Yamazaki led him to defeat several former Oda captains and establish himself as Oda's successor; after securing power in the capital and central provinces, and allying himself with Tokugawa Ieyasu (who had escaped the chaos in the home provinces caused by Akechi), Toyotomi would campaign across Shikoku, Kyūshū, and the eastern Kantō region, eventually coming to command the entirety of Japan. Having achieved the *sengoku* general's dream of unifying the nation, he established a new system of land surveying and taxation, and set his eyes on an ill-fated expedition to Korea—ultimately a failure. He died in 1598, leaving power to a select group of retainers, whose power-brokering and squabbles led to the final, climactic showdown of the Age of the Country at War, the 1600 Battle of Sekigahara (*Sekigahara no tatakai* 関ヶ原の戦い).

From this last great battle, Tokugawa Ieyasu, overthrowing the dynasty Toyotomi had attempted to set up under his own sons, led his forces to victory over the remaining Toyotomi supporters, sweeping into power, and establishing his own Tokugawa Shogunate. His shogunal

⁴ Ōta Gyūichi, *Shintei Shinchō kōki* ed. Kuwata Tadachika (Tōkyō: Shin Jinbutsu Ōraisha, 1965), 387-390.

successors' reign would last until the opening of relations with Western nations in the mid-19th century.

The history of the *sengoku* period is a history of rebellion, of retainers attacking their masters, and of great political upheaval. In the space of roughly one-hundred and thirty-five years, Japan saw one central government fall and another rise in its place. It saw countless old hereditary families destroyed by their warrior subordinates, and it saw untold numbers of men fight and die as one general threw his weight against another for control of land and political power. As a backdrop for the story of Akechi Mitsuhide, this tale of rebellion and upheaval is particularly poignant—as the Incident of Honnōji itself is perhaps the most enigmatic of these bloody coups. I will turn next to the document that has sparked that enigmatic story.

CHAPTER 3

TOKI WA IMA: SEEDS OF REBELLION AND PROBLEMATIZING THE CHRONICLE OF LORD NOBUNAGA

Ōta Gyūichi's *Shinchō-kō ki*, translated as *The Chronicle of Lord Nobunaga*, is “the most important narrative source on the career of one of the best-known personages in all of Japanese history—Oda Nobunaga,” according to the historian Jurgis Elisonas. Within its pages lies a wealth of information not only on Oda but regarding other persons who surrounded him, including Toyotomi Hideyoshi and Tokugawa Ieyasu. Both of these men originally were Oda retainers and both were destined to play a role in the unification of Japan in the latter half of the 16th century. “Inevitably,” Elisonas writes, “military conflict is a constant theme in this discourse... but it is not the single theme. Rather, *The Chronicle of Lord Nobunaga* is a rich reservoir of information on many aspects of aristocratic life and culture in sixteenth-century Japan.”

Ōta Gyūichi, himself an Oda retainer, completed *The Chronicle of Lord Nobunaga* circa 1610, and was likely drawing on first-hand knowledge regarding many of the events he records, although it is unclear as to whether he was actually present at Honnōji during Oda's assassination. Beginning with a description of Oda's conquest of his home province of Owari (a section of present-day Aichi prefecture), the work proceeds to detail Oda's solidification of power in the provinces of Mino and Ōmi (parts of present-day Gifu and Shiga prefectures), his cavalcade entrance into the capital of Kyoto in 1568, and his subsequent campaigns across

central and eastern-central Japan. It describes his maneuvers against the Takeda family, the rebellious religious sects of Echizen and Kaga provinces (parts of present-day Fukui and Ishikawa prefectures), and his preparations for an invasion of the lands held by the Mōri clan in western Honshū. Altogether the chronicle spans nearly thirty years, from 1553 (the year suggested for Nobunaga's succession to his family's lordship) until Nobunaga's death at Honnōji in 1582.

In a forthcoming translation of *The Chronicle of Lord Nobunaga* (in collaboration with Jeroen P. Lamers),⁵ Elisonas comments that Ōta's narrative style tends to be "plain and straightforward, although one hesitates to say dispassionate," though pointing out Ōta's rhetorical ability and "flourish" in providing accompanying commentary on the rebellion of Araki Murashige (1535-1586), a traitorous Oda retainer. However, when Ōta turns his brush to Oda's death at the hands of Akechi Mitsuhide in 1582, his manner may be described as "almost laconic" in nature. Elisonas writes, "[Ōta] Gyūichi does no more than describe the climactic events, without speculating on their causes; he does not broach the question of what moved Akechi Mitsuhide to rebel."⁶

On the Incident at Honnōji, Ōta gives a detailed description of Akechi's movements in the days leading up to his attack on Oda in the capital. The text explains that Akechi had been issued orders by Oda to support the western campaigns of another Oda retainer (the future second great unifier of Japan, Toyotomi Hideyoshi). Accordingly, he left the castle at Sakamoto (to the east of the capital) and arrived at his home castle of Kameyama in Tanba province

⁵ I am grateful and honored to have been graciously allowed access to parts of this upcoming work by Professor Elisonas. Due to its critical importance as an English-language source on and commentary regarding the Incident at Honnoji, Oda Nobunaga, and Akechi Mitsuhide, I have singled it out for particular exposition.

⁶ Ōta Gyūichi, *Shinchō-Kō ki*, Book XV, section 32; extract from *The Chronicle of Lord Nobunaga*, trans. and eds. J.S.A. Elisonas and J.P. Lamers (forthcoming).

(northwest of the capital, forming parts of modern-day Kyoto and Hyōgo prefectures) on the twenty-sixth day of the fifth month. On the following evening, Akechi proceeded to the shrine at Atagoyama, and paid his respects, remaining there over the night hours.

At Atagoyama, Akechi conducted a session of *renga* or linked verse poetry with the intention of dedicating the one-hundred-verse sequence to the shrine. The sacred image of Shōgun Jizō—the “winning-army” Jizō Bodhisattva—was enshrined at Atagoyama’s Hakuunji complex. It seems likely that Akechi dedicated his poetry to Shōgun Jizō, in hopes of improving his fortunes in the coming betrayal of and attack on his lord, Oda Nobunaga. According to Donald Keene, “*Renga* was attributed with the power to move the gods to grant victory in warfare and similar benefits, and Mitsuhide no doubt desired such assistance in the assassination he was contemplating.”⁷

Toki wa ima

On the evening of the twenty-seventh day of the fifth month, Akechi was accompanied by Gyōyū (dates unknown), an abbot of Hakuunji’s Itokuin or Nishi no bō cloister, using his cloister name here as a metonym, and by Satomura Jōha (1525-1602), a famed *renga* poet of the time and an associate of Akechi, in addition to six others.⁸ Ōta records the opening section of Akechi’s *renga* session as follows:

toki wa ima
ame ga shita shiru

ときは今
あめが下知る

⁷ Donald Keene, “Jōha, Poet of Linked Verse,” in *Warlords, Artists, and Commoners: Japan in the Sixteenth Century*, eds. George Elison and Bardwell L. Smith (Honolulu: Univ. of Hawai’i Press, 1981), 126.

⁸ Ibid., 125-127. A *renga* collection was commissioned by Akechi Mitsuhide and the commission given to Jōha some time prior to the Incident at Honnōji. Later, this anthology would instead be given as an offering by Jōha to Toyotomi Hideyoshi. Other sources give the date of the Atagoyama *renga* session as the twenty-fourth day of *satsuki*, a possible act of historical revisionism: The twenty-fourth day was an Atagoyama shrine special day of fortune.

satsuki ka na
(Mitsuhide)

五月哉
光秀

minakami masaru
niwa no matsu yama
(Nishinobō)

水上まさる
庭のまつ山
西坊

hana otsuru
nagare no sue o
seki tomete
(Jōha)

花落つる
流れの末を
関とめて
紹巴

This section of Ōta's narration concludes by mentioning Akechi's return to Kameyama on the twenty-eight of the month.⁹

Close analysis of this sequence of verses by Akechi, Gyōyū, and Jōha reveals on the whole a preponderance of wordplay typical of vernacular poetry. Donald Keene suggests the following translation in his article “Jōha, Poet of Linked Verse”: “Now is the time to rule all under heaven—it's the fifth month!” “The point of the verse,” writes Keene, “was the pun on *toki*, meaning ‘time,’ but also Toki, the clan-name of Mitsuhide's family.” (The Toki were themselves descended from the ancient warrior clan, the Minamoto.) Keene continues by explaining, “One meaning of the words was, therefore, ‘The Toki are about to take control of the country.’”¹⁰

In addition to the pun on *toki*, there are further homophonous and lexical allusions, including *ame*, “rain,” perhaps an association with *ama* (天), referring to “heaven” (as Keene suggests), and *shiru*, written here with the Chinese character for “know,” but potentially suggesting the (in this instance) homophonous character 領, indicating “control” or “command

⁹ The rest of the hundred-link *renga* session is given in Shimazu Tadao, *Rengashū*. Shinchō Nihon koten shūsei (Tōkyō: Shinchōsha, 1979), 316-344.

¹⁰ Keene, 125.

over.” Furthermore, the pairing of the characters for *shita* and *shiru*, as given in the original text, produces the Chinese compound *gechi* (下知), a further reference to “command” or “order.”

Finally, *satsuki*, as Keene renders above, may refer to the fifth month of the calendar, a point in the Japanese year that had seen much prior bloodshed in the disturbances and civil wars of the past 400 years: among these, a preliminary battle of the Genpei War (1180-1185) at the Uji River (the “Bridge Battle” or *hashi-gassen*) (1180); the Jōkyū Disturbance (1221) in which forces of the retired emperor Go-Toba attempted to depose the Hōjō regents; and the defeat of the Hōjō at the hands of Ashikaga Takauji (1305-1358) in 1334.¹¹ According to Izawa Motohiko, Akechi was “from the start a classicist,”¹² and it is conceivable that he would have the literary and historical knowledge to be aware of such precedents, and to place his own military action in the same lineage as these previous famous uprisings.¹³ In addition to the specific historical references possible, Elizabeth Oyler comments in an article about the *nue* monster and Minamoto no Yorimasa in *The Tale of the Heike* that the fifth month was considered to be a time of great discord, cited numerous times as a gloomy season prone to the appearance of spirits.¹⁴

The primary significance of this potential desire to list his rebellion amongst those cited above may be that each of these fifth-month disturbances is a conflict involving the Taira and Minamoto families or their descendants: The “Bridge Battle” of 1180 was between the forces of Minamoto no Yorimasa and Taira no Shigehira (among other combatants); the Jōkyū

¹¹ George Sansom, *A History of Japan to 1334* (Stanford, CA: Stanford Univ. Press, 1958), 278, 381, 466.

¹² Izawa Motohiko, *Fūin sareta Nihon shi* (Tokyo: Bestsellers, 2007), 104-111. For a summary of Akechi's activities related to the art of tea (*chanoyu*), see Kuwata Tadachika, *Oda Nobunaga*, Kuwata Tadachika chosakushū 4, (Tōkyō: Akita Shoten, 1979), 112-113.

¹³ *Satsuki* is also the name given to Akechi Mitsuhide's mother in the *bunraku* work, “Ehon Taikoki,” discussed later. Of course, it is important to note that the actual timing of his rebellion had him taking action not in *satsuki*, but in the sixth month, *minazuki*. His plotting, however, took place in *satsuki*.

¹⁴ Elizabeth Oyler, “The Nue and Other Monsters in *Heike Monogatari*,” in *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies* 68, no. 2 (2008), 1-32.

Disturbance was incited by retired emperor Go-Toba and his allies against the usurpers of Minamoto shogunal power, the Hōjō regents; and the rebellion of emperor Go-Daigo and Ashikaga Takauji (a Minamoto) against the Hōjō are all instances of battles waged by Taira and Minamoto.¹⁵ Akechi Mitsuhide, a Minamoto via his ancestral clan, the Toki, was to bring arms against Oda Nobunaga, who claimed descent from the Taira.¹⁶

With these allusions and wordplay in mind, we may suggest a nuanced gloss for the first line of the *renga*:

*The time is now,
for the Toki to command all under heaven—
Ah, the fifth month.*

Closely following Keene in most respects, I propose ensuring a reference to the Toki (to clearly demonstrate the Akechi-Toki-Minamoto lineage), and rather than his exclamatory “it’s the fifth month!” I suggest a perhaps more reminiscent gloss for *satsuki ka na*. If we are to believe Akechi to be a “classical” man, as Izawa describes him, then I believe it legitimate speculation that Akechi might indeed feel a sense of nostalgia and be very aware of the precipitous position in history in which he intended to place himself.¹⁷

The further two lines Ōta records, those by Gyōyū and Satomura Jōha, are rather less provocative than Akechi’s utterance. Gyōyū’s submission, while superficially appearing suggestive of comment on Akechi’s impending rebellion, is inconclusive at best regarding what the abbot may have known or what role he might have played in any such treason. *Minakami*, or “origin of the water’s flow,” according to any classical Japanese dictionary, could be a lexical

¹⁵ Sansom, *A History of Japan to 1334*, 278, 381, 466.

¹⁶ “Oda-shi.” *Harimaya sengoku daimyō tankyū*, http://www2.harimaya.com/sengoku/html/oda_k.html (accessed 17 Mar 2010).

¹⁷ Izawa, 107.

allusion to *minamoto*, a word defined in a similar manner and homophonous with the Minamoto clan; *masaru* is a verb indicating “to surpass” or “exceed beyond,” perhaps in reference to Akechi as a Minamoto “surpassing” Oda Nobunaga as a Taira descendant. However, with little information available on Gyōyū or his relationship to Akechi (beyond his existence as an abbot at Atagoyama), there can be no solid conclusions drawn from his line.

Satomura Jōha’s contribution, even more opaque than Gyōyū’s line, has a curious history as cited in Donald Keene’s article discussed above. Keene recounts that in the aftermath of the Incident at Honnōji, Jōha was confronted by Toyotomi Hideyoshi (now successor to Oda) and was required to explain his participation in Akechi’s *renga* session. Jōha responded to Toyotomi that he “suspected Mitsuhide might be planning” a rebellion, but “felt it would have been improper to discuss [with Hideyoshi] a mere intuition.”¹⁸ The offending line, “*ame ga shita shiru*,” according to Jōha, was a later revision by Akechi. Originally it had been “*ame ga shita naru*,” which did not suggest “taking control” or “commanding” the realm. Unbeknownst to Jōha, Akechi modified his line later to suggest his impending treason. Jōha protested that, as this was a later change to the poem, he himself was free of guilt, not being aware of the later treacherous modifications to the *renga*. From Jōha’s own lines in the poem, which might be rendered as follows:

*the falling of the flowers,
damming up
the river’s flow*

it is difficult to tease any hidden meaning or implications.

Through analysis of the Atagoyama *renga* selections, I have demonstrated two crucial points: first, that Akechi’s line indeed contains strong evidence of an impending rebellion, and

¹⁸ Keene, 126.

second, that the lack of commentary about Akechi's possible motive on Ōta Gyūichi's part serves as the foundation for speculation and interpretation continuing to the present day.

Ōta Gyūichi's Reticence: Commentary and the "Lyrical Fallacy"

Here, it may be worthwhile to pause and briefly take up the question of Ōta's silence. Was he merely doing the work of the "good chronicler," refraining from inserting his own opinion into his work? Or is his lack of commentary evidence of his own perspective and bias?

Jurgis Elisonas comments in his article "Veritable Records, the Lyrical Fallacy, and the Wrath of God" that Ōta denies in his own writings having left out details about Oda Nobunaga's reign, but that Ōta also "certainly did not dwell on the defeats of Nobunaga's forces." Elisonas asks, "Did [Ōta] intentionally leave out things that embarrassed" Nobunaga? Elisonas' conclusion is that while Ōta's omissions "do not constitute evidence of a predisposition to suppress facts deliberately," Ōta could certainly have commented further on events with which he was acquainted, and that "one can scarcely blame [Ōta] for exercising an author's right to select what was a fit topic to write about and what was not."¹⁹

Did Ōta feel that any commentary or further exposition of Akechi's actions was a topic unfit to be discussed? According to Elisonas, "One cannot help noting [Ōta's] reticence regarding failed operations and less than successful campaigns."²⁰ Perhaps the death of Nobunaga was indeed an "unfit" topic for further discussion, but Elisonas also comments that in at least two sections of Ōta's work, his "proclivity for rhetorical flourishes" emerges, once in his

¹⁹ J.S.A. Elisonas, "Veritable Records, the Lyrical Fallacy, and the Wrath of God: Ōta Gyūichi's *Chronicle of Lord Nobunaga*," lecture presented at a colloquium of the East Asian Studies Center, Indiana Univ., 5 March 2010.

²⁰ Elisonas and Lamers, trans. and eds., *The Chronicle of Lord Nobunaga*, x.

treatment and commentary on the rebellion of Araki Murashige, mentioned above, and again in his depiction of Nobunaga's grand procession from the front lines against the Takeda family back to the capital area, where, according to Ōta, Nobunaga passed various famous locations and areas and was entertained as a king might be.

Elisonas calls this penchant for bursts of poetic or rhetorical display the “lyrical fallacy,” what he describes as a chronicler or author's attempts at proving his literary credentials by embellishing the facts based on celebrated poetic references.²¹ In the case of the exposition of Araki Murashige's rebellion, rather than simply giving a dry recitation of the facts of the event, Ōta's poetic abilities are on full display in a section immediately following his factual account. Elisonas, translating Ōta, writes:

Springtime quickly passed. Already the willow, plum, apricot, and pear trees had shed their blossoms and changed their garb... The deutzia blossomed; the song of the cuckoo was heard; the continual rains of the Fifth Month arrived to cast gloom... In the incessant skirmishes, fathers were killed, or their sons preceded them in death. A melancholy beyond compare afflicted one and all.²²

Here we see an example of an author “garlanding the factual structure with flowery passages,” and setting the scene with an emotional commentary for his readers.²³ Clearly, Ōta had the capacity to employ such devices in his writing, and intended to evoke images and feelings about the events in question, but his choice to refrain from doing so regarding the Incident at Honnōji remains curious. While we cannot definitively say why, or why not, he would elect to comment further on the Honnōji affair, as he had for the Araki Murashige rebellion—neither can we know what such a commentary would have entailed—it may be worth acknowledging that such an

²¹ Elisonas, “Veritable Records,” 3-4.

²² Ibid.

²³ Ibid., 3.

omission may not merely be happenstance. Whether it was as significant as a desire to downplay Nobunaga's final demise, or was simply motivated by a feeling that the event was not worth the extra brush strokes, we cannot say for certain.

CHAPTER 4

CONTEMPORARY SOURCES: JESUIT LETTERS AND OTHER WRITINGS

Ōta Gyūichi's chronicle, while serving as the most reliable source on Oda Nobunaga's life and exploits, has, as I have shown, served as the headwaters from which multiple theories and narratives on Oda's death have flowed. Not long after the incident, works of literature and theatre began to be produced which touched upon or were devoted fully to his death, and to the traitorous actions of Akechi.

Although it is beyond the scope of this study to give a full treatment of the late sixteenth century theatrical renditions of the Honnōji incident and its aftermath, their importance must be noted as an influential source of valuable narrative and speculation. Toyotomi Hideyoshi, in the years after his victory over Akechi and other former Oda retainers, commissioned several works of noh theatre in which he himself was cast as the protagonist, including one work by a Toyotomi scribe named Ōmura Yūko (1536?-1596) entitled *Akechi uchi* (The Conquest of Akechi). *Akechi uchi* depicts Akechi as the ambitious rebel who must be destroyed by the righteous Toyotomi in a clear example of "the books being written by the victor."²⁴ The source of the narrative for many of Toyotomi's noh plays is the *Tenshō-ki* (Records of Tenshō), a biography of Toyotomi also written by Ōmura, and the noh involving Akechi clearly draws its

²⁴ A translation of *Akechi uchi* is given in Steven T. Brown, *Theatricalities of Power: The Cultural Politics of Noh* (Stanford, CA: Stanford Univ.Press, 2001), 146-149.

material from one writing in that compilation, entitled *Koretō muhongi* (The Chronicle of the Rebellion of Koretō).²⁵

Koretō muhongi itself is an important document, being another source chronologically close to the events on which it reports. Dating to 1580 and written in Sino-Japanese, its depiction of Akechi as an ambitious retainer who sought to overthrow his lord contributed to later works beginning with that same assumption, including the *Ehon Taikō-ki* (Picture Book of the Taikō), a novel by Takeuchi Kakusai serialized from 1797 to 1802. This novel inspired bunraku and kabuki plays (also titled *Ehon Taikō-ki*) that were first staged in 1799 and 1800 respectively.²⁶

Among the late 16th and early 17th century documents which are available, I have examined two in particular that provide first-hand commentary on the Honnōji incident. The letters of the Portuguese Jesuit missionary Luis Fróis, a close associate of Oda, depict in great detail the events leading up to and immediately following Oda's assassination, and are valuable for their unique perspective (the perspective of a Western visitor in Japan) on the events. In addition, the "Memoranda of Honjo Sōemon," an eponymous work authored by an Akechi retainer, Honjo Sōemon, purports to be a first-hand account of the attack on Honnōji, and of the infiltration of the temple complex itself.

Luis Fróis

Luis Fróis, born in Lisbon in 1532, arrived in Japan as a missionary for the Society of Jesus in 1563, making his way to Kyoto and gaining the good graces of Oda Nobunaga after

²⁵ Amano Fumio, *Nō ni tsukareta kenryokusha: Hideyoshi nōgaku aikōki* (Tōkyō: Kōdansha, 1997), 192-193.

²⁶ James R. Brandon and Samuel L. Leiter, eds., *Masterpieces of Kabuki: Eighteen Plays on Stage* (Honolulu: Univ. of Hawai'i Press, 2004), 354-356.

meeting with him during the construction of the castle at Nijō. The letters he sent back to his Jesuit supervisors and overseers (and therefore, back to Europe) through the Spanish outpost at Macao depict a central Japan under the firm control of a man he refers to as the “king” of Owari (province), who had “seized control of seventeen to eighteen provinces, including the eight principal provinces” around the capital, “in a very short time.”²⁷

In the Japan Fróis describes, Nobunaga is the supreme ruler, and Fróis even cites an episode in which Oda advises the Jesuit not to pay any attention to the old imperial administrators or the Shogun, “because everything is under my control; just do what I tell you, and you can go where you like.” In another epistle, Fróis writes, “what astonished me the most was the wonderful promptness with which the king is obeyed and served by his subjects... The most intimate and trusted officials of [the Shogun] are very powerful and influential... yet they all speak to Nobunaga with their hands and faces touching the ground, not one of them daring to raise his head.” Further letters from Fróis depict the famous razing of the Enryaku-ji monastic complexes in 1571, in which Nobunaga ordered his armies to butcher more than 3,000 monks, lay worshippers, women, and children, and describe Nobunaga’s increasing megalomania and self-apotheosis, as exemplified by his decrees commanding all within his domains to worship him as a living god, and by his exhortations that “there was no other lord of the universe and author of nature above him.”²⁸

Turning to the Incident at Honnōji, Fróis opens with a description of the character and nature of Akechi Mitsuhide.²⁹ He explains that Akechi was a man who, through his own

²⁷ Michael Cooper, *They Came to Japan: An Anthology of European Reports on Japan, 1543-1640*. (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1965), 93-94.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Luis Fróis, *Kan'yaku Furoisu Nihon shi*, Chuko bunko (Tōkyō: Chūō Kōron Shinsha, 2000), 143-151.

resourcefulness, foresight, and cunning, gained Nobunaga's favor, though not being of any noble origin.³⁰ However, to those in Nobunaga's inner circle, Akechi was an outsider, and was not held in high regard—but even so, Akechi had a mysterious or strange way of holding on to, and even increasing his standing with Nobunaga.³¹ A man prone to betrayal and to secret gatherings, cruel in handing out punishment, and a despot who was shrewd in disguising himself, he was skilled in conspiracy, strong in perseverance, and a master of deception and scheming.³²

Fróis goes on to say that Oda was entirely deceived by Akechi, having no knowledge of his plotting, to the point that Akechi was awarded the provinces of Tanba and Tango, and lands in Ōmi province, where Akechi built a castle rivaling even Oda's own Azuchi, considered to be the most grand of its time. So favored was Akechi that he was given the honor of preparing a reception for Tokugawa Ieyasu, but during the preparations for the event, Akechi incurred the irascible Oda's anger upon going against Oda's wishes, and it was said that Oda kicked Akechi “once or twice.”³³

Although this disagreement was concealed between the two of them, and the rumors of it quickly died down, perhaps Akechi intended to make this some kind of basis for action,³⁴ or perhaps this fueled his ambition and excessive greed in aiming to become the master of the

³⁰ その才略、深慮、狡猾により、信長の寵愛を受けることとなり。

³¹ 自らが受けている寵愛を保持し増大するための不思議な器用を身に備えていた。

³² 裏切りや密会を好み、刑を科するに残酷で、独裁的でもあったが、己れを偽装するのに抜け目がなく、戦争においては謀略を得意とし、忍耐力に富み、計略と策謀の達人であった。

³³ 信長はある密室において明智と語っていたが、元来、逆上しやすく、自らの命令に対して反対意見を言われることに堪えられない性質であったので、人々が語るところによれば、彼の好みに合わぬ要件で、明智が言葉を返すと、信長は立ち上がり、怒りをこめ、一度か二度、明智を足蹴にしたということである。

³⁴ このことから明智はなんらかの根拠を作ろうと欲したかも知れぬし。

land,³⁵ but at any rate, he hid these things in his heart, and had naught left but to await an opportunity to execute his plot.³⁶ From here, Fróis follows the general sequence of events previously explained by Ōta, detailing the arrival of the Akechi army in the capital and their surrounding of Honnōji, and Oda's last stand before his suicide in the depths of the burning temple. He claims to be an eyewitness to the events, "as [his] church in [the capital was] situated only a street away from the place where Nobunaga was staying."³⁷

Of particular interest in Fróis' letter is the degree to which he vilifies Akechi, and the information he records regarding Akechi's potential motives is in stark contrast to Ōta Gyūichi's laconic recounting of the same events. Whereas Ōta Gyūichi gives no insight into the character of Akechi, Fróis gives a detailed explanation of Akechi's cunning, affinity for plotting and scheming, and his "strange" ability to maintain Oda's favor. Furthermore, Fróis makes clear the extent to which Oda was unwittingly deceived by the "master of deception," Akechi, and spends a significant portion of his letter building up the reader's perception of Akechi's traits and behavior.

Here, it is important to remember the nature of the relationship that existed between Fróis and Oda Nobunaga. In his letters, Fróis describes many personal meetings with Oda, Oda's delight and amusement at the European inventions Fróis presents the "king" with, and the philosophical and religious debates that Fróis and his Jesuit contemporaries engaged in with the Buddhist monks Oda loathed. In short, Fróis was, for a time, a close associate of Oda, being "extremely well placed" as a reporter on Oda's character and exploits, and apparently being

³⁵あるいはその過度の利欲と野心が募りに募り、ついにはそれが天下の主になることを彼に望ませるまでになったのかもしれない。

³⁶ともかく彼はそれを胸中深く秘めながら、企てた陰謀を果す適当な時機をひたすら窺っていたのである。

³⁷ Cooper, 103.

treated with “remarkable” friendliness³⁸—it is, perhaps, no surprise that Fróis would write an account favorable to Oda, and condemnatory of Oda’s assassin, Akechi.

But Fróis, as another first-hand reporter on the incident, is a valuable, and in some ways more reliable resource than Ōta Gyūichi. Ōta does not detail the particulars of his knowledge of Akechi’s actions, nor does he mention how he is aware of his poetry session, nor does he mention how he knows the exact details of Oda’s suicide. Fróis, conversely, specifically mentions his presence in the environs of Honnōji. As a close retainer of Oda who had been with him from his days as a provincial warlord in Owari province, Ōta may indeed have remained at his side at Honnōji, but how he might have escaped death at the hands of Akechi’s army, or how he remained alive to actually compile his *Chronicle of Lord Nobunaga*, is difficult to fathom.³⁹

“Honjō Sōemon oboegaki”

Honjō Sōemon, the eponymous author of the “Memorandum of Honjō Sōemon,”⁴⁰ claims in that document, written towards the end of his life in the first decade of the 17th century, that he was a participant in Akechi’s rebellion, and specifically that, “if there are any who claim that they entered Honnōji before us, that would all be a lie.”⁴¹ He comments on his disbelief that Akechi would have Nobunaga kill himself, and goes on to recall that Akechi had been ordered to march in support of (Toyotomi) Hideyoshi’s campaign against the Mōri in the province of Bitchū (present-day Okayama prefecture). Rather than taking the road towards Yamazaki (a village at

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ To my knowledge, none of the prominent scholars on *sengoku* Japan (Elisonas, Lamers, Taniguchi) have commented explicitly on the veracity of Ōta Gyūichi’s Honnōji account.

⁴⁰ “Honjō Soemon oboegaki,” *Biburia* = *Tenri Toshokan hō* 57, (Nara-ken Tenri-shi: Tenri Daigaku Shuppanbu, 1974), 107.

⁴¹ ほんのふ寺へ我等よりさきにはい入り候などゝいふ人候ハズ、それハミなうそにて候はん。

the outskirts of the capital), Sōemon explains that he was unexpectedly ordered to go in the opposite direction, toward the capital to the east. Coordinating with other soldiers, Sōemon approached Honnōji from the south, taking the heads of those guarding the gates. Sōemon specifically mentions that the gates “were open, and inside, not even a mouse was present.”⁴²

Upon entering the main hall of the temple, Sōemon remarks that there was no one to be found, but upon heading in the direction of the temple kitchen, he seized a woman wearing a white kimono. The woman explained to Sōemon that, “the lord would be wearing a white garment,”⁴³ and Sōemon recalls that he did not know whether the “lord” the woman mentioned was Oda Nobunaga.⁴⁴

Sōemon continues by explaining that soldiers proceeded into the depths of the hall, and took one head; a man, from the far reaches of the hall, wearing an unlined aqua robe, and his sash untied, came out brandishing a sword. Hiding amongst some mosquito netting and waiting for the man to come close, Sōemon and his companions attacked him from behind, and took his head. He concludes by discussing the rewards he and his men received from Akechi’s lieutenants.

Honjō Sōemon’s account is useful as a contemporary source for a number of reasons. First, Sōemon’s mention of his surprise at the direction in which he was ordered to march—towards the capital—seems to be genuine, and the degree to which Akechi’s men were kept in the dark about his plot is corroborated in Fróis’ Honnōji letter. Fróis mentions that Akechi explained his plot only just before issuing his orders, and only to his four most trusted

⁴² それより内へ入り候へば、もんハひらいて、ねずミほどなる物なく候つる。

⁴³ うへさましろききたる物めし候はん。

⁴⁴ のぶながさまとハ存ぜず候。

lieutenants;⁴⁵ it is not inconceivable that these four were the same of which Sōemon writes in his memorandum.

Second, nowhere in Sōemon's letter is fire mentioned, whereas the act of setting the temple ablaze on the part of Oda's men is mentioned in numerous sources, including Fróis and *The Chronicle of Lord Nobunaga*. However questionable the timeline of Sōemon's infiltration of Honnōji, the lack of reference to the temple burning is a noticeable omission in this text.

Finally, Sōemon's notes do not mention the battle raging in and around the temple, while Fróis and Ōta Gyūichi both describe the close-quarters combat between Oda's attendants and Akechi's soldiers. Most importantly, both Fróis and Ōta cite Oda being wounded as the precursor to his retreat into the temple and subsequent suicide—Honjō Sōemon's account, by contrast, would suggest there was no reason for Oda to retreat. The notion of the temple being empty, and there being no sign of struggle in or around the complex, is perhaps the most glaring incongruity in Sōemon's account. But unlike the chroniclers Fróis and Ōta, Sōemon was not writing to preserve the facts of Honnōji for posterity. Perhaps he was writing merely to ensure that his name and accomplishments be remembered.

⁴⁵ Fróis, 145-6.

CHAPTER 5

THEORIES: AMBITION, VENGEANCE, AND FURTHER SPECULATION

Modern scholarship on the Incident at Honnōji and on the impetus behind Akechi Mitsuhide's actions has generally followed two lines of thought, although half a dozen or more theories can be found in the popular novels and fictional accounts on bookshelves today. While the “ambition” and “vengeance” theories dominate most of the scholarship on Honnōji, other theories, including the notion that Akechi may have been pushed into acting by powerful anti-Oda factions also are worthy of attention.

For Ambition

The first of the most common attempts at explaining the betrayal and assassination of Oda Nobunaga, the “ambition theory” or *yabō-setsu* (野望説),⁴⁶ stems from the previously-mentioned *Tenshō-ki* chapter entitled *Koretō muhongi* (The Chronicle of the Rebellion of Koretō)⁴⁷ Taniguchi Katsuhiro explains that, “as it is given in documents such as *Koretō muhongi*... from the start, Mitsuhide was an ambitious person, and hiding that ambition, he waited for his chance, in what may be called the ‘essential ambition theory’” (*honshitsu teki yabō-setsu* 本質の野望説). Taniguchi further explains that a second interpretation of the core

⁴⁶ 野 here implies “excessive” or “wild ambition,” to ill effect. Cf. 志望 *shibō*, one's wishes or desires; one's ambition.

⁴⁷ Taniguchi Katsuhiro, *Kenshō Honnōji no hen* (Tōkyō: Yoshikawa Kōbunkan, 2007), 200-201.

“ambition theory” exists in the form of what may be termed the “snap rebellion” (*toppatsu teki muhon setsu* 突発的謀反説) theory: He suggests that Mitsuhide may have been waiting to “come across a once in a lifetime chance, and his ambition suddenly spurring him on, made his move.”⁴⁸

According to Taniguchi, “more or less, all Sengoku daimyo had ambitions of taking control of the country, but taking into account the particular situations of the Oda retainers, and of Nobunaga himself, it is clear that Mitsuhide, seeing an opportunity that would not come again, took action.”⁴⁹ Referring to Nobunaga’s relatively undefended residence at Honnōji, and to the extended campaigns on which his strongest captains had been sent—Toyotomi Hideyoshi to Bitchū, and Shibata Katsuie (1522-1583) to Echizen and Kaga; Tokugawa Ieyasu was on tour in Sakai and Osaka, at Nobunaga’s behest—Taniguchi suggests that it was only Akechi who had the circumspection and opportunity to rise up against Nobunaga and deprive him of his control over the greater part of Japan.

This notion of a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to take power is also cited by Jeroen Lamers in his 2000 work on Oda Nobunaga, *Japonius Tyrannus*, which notes:

Mitsuhide’s timing was no doubt determined by the changes Nobunaga’s military and political stature had undergone since the Takeda campaign. Supreme rule finally came within Nobunaga’s grasp in June 1582; the highest offices in the country had already been offered to him, and if his campaigns in Shikoku and western Japan were successful, then he would be practically unassailable. Mitsuhide understood that if he ever wanted to be a master of the realm himself, it was a question of now or never. Had he struck at Nobunaga one year earlier and been successful, then he would still have faced a powerful front organized against Nobunaga, one that he probably could not have withstood. However, if he succeeded at this point, then he could be certain that his only opponents would come from inside the Oda camp, and he was sure that he could deal with them. As it turned out, his judgment was wrong.⁵⁰

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ Jeroen P. Lamers, *Japonius Tyrannus: The Japanese Warlord Oda Nobunaga Reconsidered* (Leiden, Netherlands: Hotei Publishing, 2000), 215.

Taniguchi cautions the reader, however, by pointing out that the commission of *Koretō muhongi* (as part of *Tenshōki*) was by Toyotomi Hideyoshi himself—Akechi’s own nemesis, and Oda’s future successor. While even those scholars who investigate other theories can accept the notion of a “snap rebellion,” or acting based on a one-time opportunity, he cautions the reader later that *Koretō muhongi* is more likely Hideyoshi’s version of Akechi’s reasoning, and that other such contemporary texts regarding the “ambition theory” are similarly in need of critical scrutiny.⁵¹

For Vengeance

The “vengeance theory” or *enkon-setsu* (怨恨説), by contrast, was a later Meiji period development according to the historian and scholar Takayanagi Mitsutoshi, who cites Edo-period popular fiction (specifically, *Ehon Taikō-ki*, in which the term *enkon* is explicitly used) as its origin. Takayanagi’s work laid the foundation for modern literature on the vengeance theory by treating in turn the various reasons behind why Akechi may have come to bear a grudge against Oda, and offering counter-arguments against those reasons.⁵²

Taniguchi cites the five most common related lines of reasoning behind the “enmity theory” that have generally been utilized by authors: 1) a lack of trust between Akechi and Oda; 2) a buildup of enmity over time; 3) the widely-accepted, but apocryphal sacrifice of Akechi’s

⁵¹ Taniguchi, *Honnōji no hen*, 226.

⁵² See Takayanagi Mitsutoshi, *Akechi Mitsuhide*, Jinbutsu Sōsho 1, 4th printing (Tōkyō: Yoshikawa Kōbunkan, 1963). Regarding Takayanagi’s work, Lamers writes, “As Takayanagi Mitsutoshi has disproved all [theories related to Akechi’s supposed desire for vengeance] in his biography of [Akechi], it is excessive ambition that applies in Mitsuhide’s case.” Lamers, 215.

mother at Yagami Castle; 4) Akechi's fear of being removed from his base of power; and 5) Akechi's uncertain future within the Oda hierarchy.⁵³

The first reason, suggesting a lack of trust between Akechi and Oda, is difficult to ground in extant documents, according to Taniguchi. He explains that, by contrast, Akechi is generally seen in the contemporary materials as respectful of Nobunaga, at least outwardly, to the point of ensuring to honor him during tea ceremonies. Taniguchi asserts that it is quite difficult to find evidence of mistrust in the extant literature.⁵⁴ However, my own feeling is that Akechi may have been given fewer direct commands compared to other lieutenants of Oda—Akechi seems to be cited only as having been ordered to pacify Tanba province, and the rest of his missions were as reinforcement or in direct support of Nobunaga's own actions.

The second reason, the buildup of enmity (on Akechi's part) over time, was a theory developed in the Edo period specifically relating to stories of Oda's consistent bullying of Akechi. Taniguchi mentions a blunder or misstep on Akechi's part in preparing entertainment for Tokugawa Ieyasu which angered Oda; in turn, Akechi was removed from this duty, and was commanded to proceed as reinforcements for the western campaigns.⁵⁵

The third reason involves an anecdote in which Akechi's own mother was utilized as a hostage in a prisoner exchange between Oda and the lord of Yagami Castle, Hatano Hideharu.

During the siege of this castle in 1579, in order to seek a peaceful capitulation, Oda invited

⁵³ Taniguchi, *Honnōji no hen*, 195.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 204-205.

⁵⁵ Specifically, *Ehon Taikō-ki* mentions three reasons for the development of Akechi's grudge against Oda. Along with Akechi's blunder in preparing entertainment for Tokugawa Ieyasu (the second reason given here), it suggests that Akechi was being pressured by Oda Nobunaga into adopting one of Oda's pages, Mori Ranmaru, whose late father's fief had come into Akechi's possession (relevant to the fifth reason, below). Oda intended to pressure Akechi into leaving the fief to Mori, rather than to Akechi's own descendants. In addition, *Ehon Taikō-ki* mentions an incident in which Akechi had press-ganged another officer's retainers into his own forces, resulting in that officer's ineffectual performance on the battlefield. Oda was enraged to learn of Akechi's presumptuous behavior.

Hatano's brothers to his camp, and as reassurance against betrayal, offered Akechi's mother as a hostage in return. In the end, Oda forced the Hatano brothers to commit ritual suicide, and Akechi's mother was killed in retaliation.⁵⁶ While a seemingly strong support for any wish for vengeance on Akechi's part, the unnecessary death of Mitsuhide's mother in a prisoner exchange, according to Taniguchi, is actually a falsehood. He explains that, according to numerous reliable records, and corroborated by Akechi's own documents, the siege of Yagami Castle proceeded so well that the obstinate lord of the fortress, Hatano Hideharu, and his brothers, were forcibly removed by his own troops and the castle surrendered, and there was no need to coerce a capitulation by prisoner exchange. The commonly cited anecdote that Nobunaga traded Mitsuhide's mother for the Hatano brothers is, according to Taniguchi, "a tragic, 'Sengoku-like' story which appeals to the reader, and it is clear that this is not a true occurrence."⁵⁷ Other sources comment that this rumor only appeared in later documents, and that there are no references to any hostage exchange in reliable contemporary works.⁵⁸

The fourth reason, Akechi's fear of being removed from his power base in Tanba and the capital area, is explicated by both Taniguchi and another modern scholar, Fujita Tatsuo. Taniguchi suggests a particular document implying that Akechi's province of Tanba would be taken from him and given to another retainer, while Fujita hypothesizes that Akechi would have been aware of other lieutenants being shifted. Of particular relevance was the case of the lord of Ibaraki Castle in Settsu Province, Nakagawa Kiyohide, who was due to be moved to the western

⁵⁶ In another version of the tale, it is said that the Hatano brothers were crucified and stabbed, as to die from bleeding out.

⁵⁷ Taniguchi, *Honnōji no hen*, 208.

⁵⁸ Nishigaya Yasuhiro, *Oda Nobunaga jiten* (Tōkyō: Tōkyōdō Shuppan, 2000), 269-270. Nishigaya comments that the anecdote about Akechi's mother being left to die is not recorded in *Shinchō-kō ki*, nor does it appear in any contemporary diaries of court nobles. He asserts that an event such as an Oda general's mother being executed as a hostage is one that would have been mentioned in at least one contemporary document, and that this lack of corroboration is evidence enough of the fictional nature of the Yagami Castle incident.

provinces after the pacification of Settsu.⁵⁹ Furthermore, Taniguchi mentions (and Fróis corroborates) that the majority of Akechi's own troops were men from Tanba and other areas he personally oversaw, and that the loss of these areas would be a major blow to his relative influence and power.⁶⁰

The fifth and final reason given by Taniguchi (also mentioned by Fujita) is the uncertain future that Akechi faced within the Oda hierarchy. Other retainers were gradually increasing their influence—Fujita specifically posits Toyotomi Hideyoshi's deepening connections with Oda through marriage ties and more prestigious commands as proof of other retainers rising in the ranks. In addition, Akechi, who is said to have been acting as mediator between the powerful Shikoku daimyo Chōsōkabe Motochika and Oda, would have lost face in the event Nobunaga carried out his plans to invade that island to the south.⁶¹

The “Puppeteer” Theory

While these two popular theories have remained the foundation for scholarship and speculation about Akechi's motives, a third theory, which I will briefly describe here, offers an alternative and possibly compatible explanation: rather than acting alone, a lone conspirator bent either on ruling the land himself or on revenge, Akechi may have been pushed into action by powerful forces in the capital. According to the “puppeteer theory,” or *kuromaku-setsu* (黒幕説),

⁵⁹ Fujita Tatsuo, *Honnōji no hen no gunzō: chūsei to kinsei no sōkoku* (Tōkyō: Yūzankaku Shuppan, 2001), 150-151.

⁶⁰ Tanba as the staging ground for the raising of Akechi's army is corroborated by Fróis, who mentions Akechi's return to Tanba for this purpose. See Fróis, 145.

⁶¹ Taniguchi, *Honnōji no hen*, 203-215. Fróis corroborates this in his letter about Honnōji, explaining that Nobunaga was defenseless in the capital while his officers were marching towards battle with the Mōri, and while his third son was preparing to lead soldiers to pacify Shikoku. See Fróis, 146.

the court nobles, or perhaps even the Emperor himself, may have ordered Akechi to slay Oda in order to remove the threat he posed to their venerable political system.

It is recorded in multiple reliable sources that Oda Nobunaga eschewed political appointments several times—having been offered by the court, on separate occasions, ministerial positions, the chancellorship of the realm, a commission as shōgun, and even an imperial regency. Nobunaga responded to these entreaties coolly. Lamers writes, “Evidently, he felt so certain of himself that he saw no need to make a quick decision... The question raised by Nobunaga’s refusal to accept the highest positions in the traditional Japanese polity is whether he actually planned to supersede the Imperial and shogunal frameworks for legitimizing power.”⁶²

Nishigaya Yasuhiro remarks in his *Oda Nobunaga jiten* that Oda’s refusal of political appointments led to the question of how Oda viewed the Imperial establishment—refusing the highest of appointments was tantamount to rejecting the authority of the Court, and the legitimacy of the imperial system. Evidence exists that Oda intended to set up his son, Nobutada, as the bearer of the court titles (perhaps including shōgun), while Oda Nobunaga himself was to be separate from (and above) these things, as a “man of the kingdom.”⁶³

Izawa Motohiko claims that Akechi was a man who, should the emperor order the assassination of Oda, would spring into action. He characterizes Akechi as an “old-type captain,” someone who would, at the slightest suggestion of an imperial order, not hesitate to fulfill that obligation. Izawa suggests that Oda was lured into the capital and away from his well-defended

⁶² Lamers, 213-214.

⁶³ Nishigaya, 277-279. “Man of the kingdom” is a rough gloss of *tenkajin* (天下人). “Tenka” referred to the lands Nobunaga saw as his domain, a term that, ostensibly, would eventually have encompassed all of Japan if he had his way.

fortress at Azuchi by the scheming court nobles, who feared Oda's refusal to accept court rank.⁶⁴ He describes Akechi as having close ties with the court, and proposes that, if we are to believe that the imperial court was involved in a plot, Akechi was offered the position of shōgun in exchange for the extermination of Oda Nobunaga. Izawa speculates that this must be the origin of the tongue-in-cheek reference to Akechi as a "Three-Day Shōgun," for after the death of the most powerful man in Japan, nothing would have stopped Akechi from acceding to the highest military rank. In conclusion, Izawa notes that because Akechi's reign was so short, it is likely the imperial court pleaded ignorance and innocence to Toyotomi Hideyoshi after his defeat of Akechi; and thus that Akechi may have been *de jure* shōgun for a time is lost to history.⁶⁵

⁶⁴ Reliable documents suggest that Oda was attempting to pressure the current emperor, Ōgimachi, into abdicating in favor of a more agreeable and more easily manipulated prince. Ōgimachi's stubborn refusals were a source of contention between Oda and the court.

⁶⁵ Izawa, 110.

CHAPTER 6

MODERN INTERPRETATIONS: *TENCHIJIN* AND *SENGOKU MUSŌ 2*

Although the modern renditions of the tale of Akechi Mitsuhide and Honnōji are far too numerous to describe in exhaustive detail here, a look at two recent interpretations and at their depictions of Akechi's motives will suffice to demonstrate the continuance of the narrative of Honnōji, and its continued popularity. One of the *taiga* dramas produced by the Japan Broadcasting Corporation (NHK), the 2009 television series *Tenchijin* included a depiction of Akechi and his relationship with Oda Nobunaga as part of a larger tale about the Uesugi family of northeastern Japan.⁶⁶

Tenchijin portrays Akechi firmly as a disaffected and harried retainer of Oda. The series seems to draw inspiration from the first and second theories under the umbrella of the “vengeance theory” as stated by Taniguchi. It briefly elaborates on Toyotomi Hideyoshi's western campaigns, and Oda's sending Akechi and his men as reinforcements. The series depicts Oda issuing Akechi orders to join Toyotomi as reinforcements in episode 18, and Oda asking Akechi if he is discontented with the orders he has been given. Akechi replies that he is not, but the narration goes on to explain that, “to Akechi Mitsuhide, it was a great insult to be placed

⁶⁶ *Tenchijin* (天地人), which may be roughly glossed as “Virtues of the Peerless Ruler,” is a concept derived from Confucian literature, in which the perfect ruler is supported by the will of heaven (天), commands the advantage of the land (地), and is in harmony with his subjects or people (人). During the scene in which Oda takes his life, he is visited by the spirit of Uesugi Kenshin, the late scion of the Uesugi family, who points out to Oda that he was master of the first two virtues, but did not enjoy harmony with his subjects. His defeat at the hands of his own lieutenant, Akechi Mitsuhide, testifies to this.

under Hideyoshi.”⁶⁷ This scene, in addition to others in the series showing Akechi and Oda, shows a direct inspiration from the modern scholarship on the “vengeance theory.”

Similarly, the recent PlayStation 2 console game *Sengoku Musō 2* (released in February 2006 in Japan, and in September 2006 in the United States) provides a glimpse at another interpretation of the Incident at Honnōji—in this representation, the player of the game has the ability to guide Akechi to victory (or defeat, depending on the player’s skill) against Oda.⁶⁸ In this game is displayed a form of the “ambition theory,” in which Akechi desires to overthrow Oda for his own personal gain.

Upon choosing to play as Akechi Mitsuhide, the player guides Akechi through some of Oda’s early campaigns, and supports the Owari lord in consolidating his power in the central provinces against rivals such as the Azai and Asakura. Over time, however, Akechi begins to question Oda’s methods in bringing peace to the war-torn nation, and after witnessing Oda’s brutal methods against his enemies, decides to attempt a rebellion. Through internal dialogue, Akechi reveals that “for what he wishes is the end of the chaos,” and that the one in whom he saw the ability to achieve that was Oda Nobunaga. But, seeming to debate with himself and do an about-face in midstream, he posits:

Whether it is by Nobunaga’s hand... no, no matter by whose hand, if the people’s suffering and this chaos can be put to an end... No, I, by my own hand, want to put an end to the chaos—I want to shape the realm that I desire!⁶⁹

Declaring that “the enemy is at Honnōji,”⁷⁰ he surrounds the temple and engages Oda in a duel. After defeating Oda, Mitsuhide backpedals some, revealing that, while at this point he

⁶⁷ *Tenchijin*, ep.18, 20:00-21:30.

⁶⁸ *Sengoku musō* (戦国無双) might be given as “unequalled in the warring states.” Cf. 国士無双 *kokushi musō*, one who is unparalleled across the nation.

⁶⁹ *Sengoku Musō 2*. Koei, Dev./Dist. 2006, PlayStation 2. Japanese.

could create the domain he desires, what he truly wants to see is the world Nobunaga would create. But before Oda can recover from his shock at this turn of events, he is assassinated, not by Akechi, but by a sniper's bullet, in this stylized version of the Honnōji narrative.

In this representation, Akechi clearly states his intent to supplant Oda as the unifier and pacifier of Japan. While the “ambition theory” does not necessarily comment definitively on the *focus* for Akechi's desire to take over Nobunaga's mantle of power, we may see here another example of popular theorizing—in this case, Akechi's ambition is based on his belief that he can, perhaps, bring about a more desirable peace than Oda. In both television and video games, however, we find examples of this modern-day interest, and of how that interest continues to generate speculation.

⁷⁰ 敵は本能時にあり *teki wa Honnōji ni ari*.

CHAPTER 7

CONCLUSIONS: HISTORY AS NARRATIVE AND AKECHI, THE FAILED NOBLE REBEL

As a product of my research, I have come to two lines of inquiry which, as part of a future thesis or research project, I would like to expand and further explicate. The story of Akechi Mitsuhide, as it continues to pique the interest of both scholars and the current generation of those surrounded by new forms of media—specifically, the “gamer generation”—deserves such further study in the context of two larger questions.

First, the story of the Incident at Honnōji, and invariably, the story of Akechi Mitsuhide as a whole, ought to be analyzed from the perspective of how it has been transmitted and how it has evolved across the four centuries since 1582. When a narrative is continually revisited and reworked, can those reworkings be considered part of the event’s history? How one separates what is “historical fact” and what is “literary truth” is particularly relevant to the study of Akechi Mitsuhide, in which many details are obscure or entirely absent from the historical record.

Second, the development of an “Akechi the character,” in the same vein as how other historical figures across Japanese history acquire fictional or anecdotal personalities, is a further topic of interest. As described above, Akechi is characterized variously as an upstart retainer who believes he can rule the land better than Oda Nobunaga; as a disaffected lieutenant who, seeking revenge for slights and humiliation, assassinates his lord; and as an agent of the imperial court who aimed to put down a general who was threatening to the establishment, amongst other descriptions. The sources of these characterizations, and the tropes Akechi may fit into as a

member of the larger *dramatis personae* of Japanese literary history, are also worth a deeper look.

“What Is History?”

A question that was posed to me by a panel judge upon presenting a section of this thesis in April 2010 to The Ohio State University’s Department of East Asian Languages Undergraduate Research Forum was to the effect of, “What is history?” Is history simply the facts of an event, its cause-and-effect, or is it the entire corpus of literature and discourse about the event as well? Akechi’s betrayal and assassination of Oda is an event documented and reported as factual, and yet the absence of a final answer as to its cause, as we have seen, continues to spawn theories and stories which are as important to the study of the event as the event itself. The question that was posed to me, in effect, was a question about the properties of that which we consider history—what is the nature of history, and what does it include? In the absence of a clear cause-and-effect—or perhaps even if one could be definitively established—how do we separate that which is speculation and fictionalization from that which is to be taken as factual?

At least in part, the answer to the question lies in understanding the means by which narratives are constructed, the nature of how narratives are selectively transmitted, and the differences in the consciousness of the audience as to what is necessarily “factual” and what is “true.”

The historian Hayden White utilizes the term “emplotment” to describe the underlying similar forms which historical and fictional (“imaginative,” he describes them) narratives take. He argues, “Although historians and writers of fiction may be interested in different kinds of events, both the forms of their respective discourses and their aims in writing are often the same.

... [T]he techniques or strategies that they use in the composition of their discourses can be shown to be substantially the same, however different they may appear on a purely surface, or dictional, level of their texts.”⁷¹ In essence, both historians and novelists (playwrights, et cetera) are attempting to create a “verbal image of reality” that is “coherent” (flows properly from description to description in an intelligible and logical way) and “corresponding” (properly resembles the events in question). In both historical and fictional discourse, this “verbal image of reality” is constructed, naturally, through the use of language, and inherent to the use of language is the use of narrative methods such as irony and metaphor. In other words, the similarity between historical and fictional discourse is in the tropological strategies by which they are generated. The poetic process of “emplotment,” the “fusing” of events into a “comprehensible totality,” is shared between historical writings and fictional ones.⁷²

White criticizes the monolithic viewpoint of historical writers who purport to be writing “just the facts,” working on the assumption that the facts speak for themselves. On the contrary, exactly because the facts do not speak for themselves (either literally or figuratively), we describe events using language, and language brings “cognitive baggage,” a concept that some historians have failed to realize through self-analysis and reflexive criticism. Historians must understand that history does not create its own narrative, but rather, in the same vein as authors of fiction, those who describe any events in human experience (and purport to be giving just the facts) are bound by the nature of linguistic expression to create a flowing plot that is a construction. One does not discover how history flows—the flow of history is constructed by

⁷¹ Hayden White, “The Fictions of Factual Representation,” in Fletcher, Angus, *The Literature of Fact: Selected Papers from the English Institute* (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 1976), 21.

⁷² White, 28.

authors, and this construction is accomplished via essentially poetic means.⁷³ The nature of language—the means by which we describe events—is what governs narrativization, regardless of the nature of the event in question. Whether the event is fictional or historical, both are represented in fundamentally similar ways.

Related to the nature of the creation of narrative is the means by which it is transmitted and revised through history. A section of Richard Bauman's article on folklore discusses the notion of traditionality, which is defined as "a selective, interpretative construction, the social and symbolic creation of a connection between aspects of the present and an interpretation of the past."⁷⁴

Bauman's discussion of traditionality implies that traditions that are part of a shared cultural heritage are subject to reinvention based on present conditions—he cites the "modern construction of invented traditions such as Royal Jubilees as ways of giving symbolic resonance and authority to modern social formations."⁷⁵ This provides further credence to the belief that history is not unchanging and immune to interpretation, but rather is a living concept that can be modified and updated across time—and traditions we believe to be ancient might actually be constructions of the present. History is not chiseled into a stone or brushed onto a scroll, then codified as some sort of scientific law—rather, history is told and retold, and all retellings of a

⁷³ White, 21-22. If the aim of historians is to relate facts about actual events in a "coherent" way that corresponds to what happened, the aim of authors of fiction is to relate facts about events both real and imagined. While their intentions may be different, writers in both domains aim to represent human experience, cognition, and emotion by means of narrative language. Both types of writing require narrative coherence and mimetic correspondence.

⁷⁴ Richard Bauman, ed., *Folklore, Cultural Performances, and Popular Entertainments* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1992), 32.

⁷⁵ Ibid.

narrative are subject to modification based on the author or performer, as well as on the reader or audience member.

Finally, another important aspect of history as a fluid concept is in the way narratives about a particular event are generated, and the sources from which these narratives are derived. The “emplotment” of historical events, especially in literature, is not derived from a singular, immutable source that dispenses fact and demands strict adherence to its version of events; rather, narratives build on narratives, and it is important to recognize the various possible ways that an event’s particulars can be researched and integrated into new works.

The historian Henry D. Smith II, in an article discussing the continued interest in, and the development of the narrative of the Chūshingura story (a narrative based on the historical vendetta of the forty-seven masterless samurai who avenged their lord in 1701), discusses three classifications of Japanese historical records, citing from the work of an Japanese Edo-period literary scholar, Hasegawa Tsuyoshi. These different types of records are treated differently by authors in their means of generating new narratives, and in how they are used by authors when new stories and works are created.⁷⁶

The first type, those “closest to history,” are original documents authored by figures contemporary to, and in some cases directly involved in the events in question. While these documents themselves are sometimes suspect due to authorial bias or intentional misrepresentation of the facts, they remain valuable as the only texts which actually purport to detail the event as it occurred.

The second type, *jitsuroku* (true records 実録), are those texts which are an amalgam of secondary documents and popular opinion or rumor about a particular event—“although often

⁷⁶ Henry D. Smith, "The Capacity of Chūshingura: Three Hundred Years of Chūshingura," *Monumenta Nipponica* 58, no. 1 (2003), 1-42.

highly unreliable,” Smith remarks, “such accounts bore the presumption that they were conveying information about events that actually had happened.”⁷⁷ In other words, these “true records” were not necessarily factual, but were considered to be “true” in the sense that their audiences believed them to be proper representations of the event in question.

Finally, Smith mentions works of theatre and popular literature for the masses, whose authors were “interested in entertainment rather than historical truth, and they freely expanded upon and embellished” the particulars of the event. He also comments that these texts regularly had details intentionally altered for legal reasons, as the Edo-period central administration of Japan had strict restrictions on the treatment of “contemporaneous political events.”⁷⁸

These three categories of text—primary sources, *jitsuroku*, and theatre/popular literature, are a useful guide for our understanding of history and the development and perpetuation of a narrative. In the case of Akechi Mitsuhide, prior to modern scholarship and history as an academic science, the works extant from which narratives would have been developed are primarily those of the latter two categories, the “true records” and theatre. While the previously-mentioned “Chronicle of the Rebellion of Koretō,” as cited by Taniguchi Katsuhiro in his explication of the “ambition theory,” may be considered a primary source document (as its commissioner was Toyotomi Hideyoshi, if not a first-hand eyewitness to the events at Honnōji, then at least a general close to the personalities involved), it is characterized as being biased towards Toyotomi’s position as victor and avenger of Oda Nobunaga. In this way, its purported portrayal of the facts of Honnōji lays a foundation for future works to be similarly biased. Similarly, the letters authored by the Jesuit Luis Fróis, while written by a man close in time and

⁷⁷ Smith, 16.

⁷⁸ Ibid., 17.

proximity to the events in question, are colored by his seeming adoration of his patron, Oda Nobunaga, and thus we must find his characterization of Akechi just as suspect.

Other works on Honnōji, such as the puppet play titled *Ehon Taikō-ki* (Picture Book of the Taikō) and the noh play, *Akechi uchi* (Conquest of Akechi) fit firmly in the theatre category. As with the *Koretō* chronicle that inspired it, *Akechi uchi* denounced Akechi for his ambitious greed, and the later “Picture Book” iterations in bunraku and kabuki depict him as a villain and certified example of treachery. These stories cannot be considered as “close to history” as primary sources, and at any rate were written, in Smith’s characterization of such works, for entertainment purposes only. It is as if they are homeopathic medical treatments, which are required by law to be described as “not intended to diagnose or treat any disease or condition”—in Smith’s view, it seems, such works, while potentially useful in their own right as evidence of larger trends, are not intended to be understood as historically accurate or to represent factual events.

By analyzing these three related lines of argument as to what constitutes history, I believe we may make the claim that history is certainly not a monolithic construction that is limited to the facts of an event. Rather, history is a living and changing concept, if we understand it as not only the particulars of an event, but also as the accumulation of successive narratives and stories which are woven around it, forming a network of pathways that intertwine and digress as theories and conjecture develop. In the case of Akechi Mitsuhide and Honnōji, authors that bring their own perspectives and viewpoints to the arena of literary discourse have continued to take up brush and pen to retell the story, because a story that is engrained in the shared cultural heritage of the people—a people’s folklore—is something that allows them to remain connected to the past while adapting old tales to modern circumstances.

The Honnōji incident, clearly, is a case of an old tale being adapted to modern circumstances, as evidenced by the continuing academic debate about its causes and exact details, and by the proliferation of popular representations of the event in television and video games. The tale is told and retold, and in each instance takes on a different meaning based on its audience and its authors; and is this not also a part of the history of Akechi Mitsuhide and Honnōji?

Akechi, the Failed Noble Rebel

A second point of consideration in relation to how Akechi has been portrayed and how he may be framed as a figure in Japanese history across time relates to the depiction of his character—in both senses of the word. His motivations and his reasoning behind assassinating Oda Nobunaga may never be known. There is currently no extant document, signed “Akechi Mitsuhide,” that states in plain language, “Now is the time—and this is why I did it.” Because of this, any and all speculation on his reasons for the assassination from a historical standpoint is inextricably linked with the exposition of an “Akechi who wanted vengeance,” or an “Akechi who was ambitious,” and both of these are characterizations that conjure up a certain tropological bent in describing him.

Many tropes exist in the Japanese literary tradition, but the “failed noble rebel” characterization in particular allows for an interesting take on how Akechi may be perceived, and how authors may have come to fictionalize him over time. Perhaps one of the best examples of this “failed noble rebel” trope is Minamoto no Yorimasa, who figures prominently in several episodes of *The Tale of the Heike*. Elizabeth Oyler, in her article examining the narrative of Minamoto no Yorimasa and the “Nue” episode of *Heike monogatari*, describes Yorimasa as a

man whose literary and martial talents, while considerable, do not garner him the respect or recognition he desires from the Imperial court—Yorimasa is depicted, “as a man of military and belletristic skills who is caught in a repetitive cycle in which he never wins full appreciation for either talent.”⁷⁹ *Heike monogatari* records that he fought first against his own Minamoto kinsmen in the Hōgen Rebellion of 1156 in service to the emperor, but was not sufficiently rewarded for his efforts; later, in the 1159 Heiji Rebellion, he sided with Taira no Kiyomori against Minamoto rebels, but remained dissatisfied with his failure to rise in rank and be recognized for his status as a member of the victorious side. At the last, he convinces an imperial prince, Mochihito, to attempt a takeover of the throne, but this final act of rebellion is stifled by Taira no Kiyomori’s forces, and Yorimasa is forced to flee, committing ritual suicide in 1180 at a battle near the Uji River outside the capital.

In addition to his martial prowess, Yorimasa is credited by *Heike* as having written two poems, both of which are written in longing for greater recognition and elevation in rank. These poems, each composed after Yorimasa’s twin defeats of the *nue* monster which had plagued the emperor, attempt to stress to the imperial court that Yorimasa, for all his military and literary skills, has gone unnoticed: Although he is praised in both instances of poetic demonstration by the narrative of *Heike*, Oyler points out that “each time he does something to win fame, the victory is short-lived,” that Yorimasa must continue to attempt to make a name for himself. The fame and recognition he gains from his poetic exploits is fleeting, and ultimately he is seen as a tragic, yet parodic figure, overshadowed by larger personalities of the *Heike* era such as Taira no Kiyomori and Minamoto no Yoritomo, and never rising to their level of fame.⁸⁰

⁷⁹ Oyler, 25.

⁸⁰ Ibid.

Yorimasa strives to gain recognition for his meritorious deeds, believing himself unappreciated and ignored by the imperial court. Through a combination of poetic prowess and rebellion, he attempts to ensure his own fame, only to be ignominiously defeated by his own ambition.

Similar to Yorimasa's ambitious attempts at winning fame, authors have characterized Akechi Mitsuhide and his actions at Honnōji as fueled by an ambitious desire to rise to the top of the military authority in Japan. Beginning with the "Chronicle of the Rebellion of Koretō," cited under the "ambition theory" described earlier, Akechi is described as desperate to rise in status, and seeing Oda Nobunaga's defenseless position at Honnōji in 1582, seized on the opportunity to become heir to the Japan Oda was on course to create. The narrative of his ambition causing his downfall also appears in *Akechi uchi* and the later *Ehon Taikō-ki*, and, although the outcome of his rebellion is a matter of user input in modern video game representations, his ambition makes an appearance in modern-day fictionalizations such as "*Sengoku Musō 2*," cited above.

As I have speculated under the auspices of the "vengeance theory," Akechi seems to have been relegated to serving only in support roles to other, more illustrious Oda retainers. Taniguchi Katsuhiro cites, and Luis Fróis corroborates, the orders issued to Akechi to serve as master of ceremonies for the entertainment of Tokugawa Ieyasu just prior to the Honnōji incident, which led to Akechi's chastisement by Oda, and may indeed have pushed him towards rebellion. In addition to being antagonized here by Oda, Akechi seems to have been passed over for major commands, including the pacification of the western provinces held by the Mōri clan (a task assigned to Toyotomi Hideyoshi) and the push into Echizen and Kaga provinces, against the religious rebels and the Uesugi forces there (a campaign assigned to Shibata Katsuie). As a final act of humiliation (intentional or otherwise), Akechi was posted as reinforcements for Toyotomi

would shed light on how “Akechi the character” has developed, and how Akechi has become the famous (infamous, perhaps) traitor of the *sengoku* era.

Perhaps the most ironic implication of this association with Yorimasa would be the aforementioned possibility of Akechi’s awareness of fifth-month rebellion narratives, and desire to place himself among them. If he had Yorimasa in mind upon launching his own fifth month rebellion, then it is an irony that, not only did Akechi go down in history as being a similarly cultured fellow, but he has come to be seen as equally disgruntled in the folklore about him that has evolved.

The Time Is Now

One final example of how Honnōji and Akechi have continued to inspire creativity and have continued to generate interest is, of course, this thesis itself. That one student at one university has become interested in the history of a somewhat obscure figure in Japanese history is a testament to how compelling and how tantalizing the Honnōji story has become. (It goes without saying how much more compelling it must be to attract the interest not only of young people in Japan, but in the United States, and indeed around the world.) The exportation of Japanese culture through television, comics, and video games is what sparked my interest in the nation and its history, and the *Sengoku Musō* game series in particular opened my eyes to the fascinating narratives, complex politics, and engaging battles of the period. Clearly, the allure of the Akechi mystery is palpable—it spawned this research, and with nurturing and a bit of luck, will develop into a study lasting a lifetime.

It appears that for the foreseeable future, Akechi Mitsuhide’s story will continue to be perpetuated through print, television, and interactive multimedia such as video games—and

Hideyoshi's western campaign. Without being given his own opportunity to shine, Akechi seems to have been consigned to serve in a subordinate role in nearly all his military endeavors. With little recourse but to rebel in order to ensure he would rise to the top, it is therefore no surprise that Akechi would march on Honnōji.

In the literary field, Akechi's interest in and strength at *renga* seem overshadowed by the scrutiny of his most famous contribution, the Atagoyama poem links that declared his intent to rebel. His association with the renowned poet Satomura Jōha, and the *renga* collection Akechi commissioned of him, were both achievements stripped from him after his rebellion. As mentioned previously, Jōha eventually completed the collection, but presented it as a gift to Toyotomi Hideyoshi, and Jōha denied any support for Akechi or his actions. Not only was Akechi made impotent in military matters, his literary legacy was later revoked.⁸¹

In this way, Akechi's narrative begins to read much like the "failed noble rebel" narrative of Minamoto no Yorimasa. Like Yorimasa in *Heike monogatari*, Akechi's military exploits were glossed over or went unrecognized, while other Oda retainers were given prestigious appointments and important objectives; and his literary exploits were buried under his vilification as the traitor, never gaining him much fame, except insofar as they commend him to history for his rebellion.

Whether Akechi can truly be considered a member of the "failed noble rebel" character archetype, as exemplified by Minamoto no Yorimasa, is a subject worthy of further inquiry, as it

⁸¹ In another example of Akechi's literary legacy being stripped from him, a later Edo-period work, *Bakemono Taiheiki*, seems to pass over Akechi as a character in favor of Tokugawa Ieyasu. In this work, which parodies events portrayed in *Ehon Taikō-ki*, the major players of the *sengoku* period (Tokugawa, Oda, Toyotomi, *et al.*) are represented as monsters (*bakemono* 化け物) that in turn defeat or replace one another. Akechi, the assassin of Oda, was to play a part, but his *bakemono* was not included in the story; it is speculated that he was passed over due to the latterday consideration of Oda, Toyotomi, and Tokugawa as a set, i.e., the "three great unifiers." See Julie Davis, "The Trouble with Hideyoshi: Censoring ukiyo-e and the Ehon Taikōki Incident of 1804," *Japan Forum* 19, no. 3 (2007), 293-295.

seizing on this continued interest, the time is ripe for a renewed study of Akechi and the Incident at Honnōji. With the resurgence of an interest in history, and specifically, in warrior culture and military narratives in Japan, an opportunity for interdisciplinary dialogue and discussion has presented itself--a dialogue in which scholars may be able to shed more light on the story of a man shrouded in mystery.⁸² The hall of mirrors into which scholars and students of the period are drawn upon opening the door to Honnōji deserves further exploration; and while we may not be able to ever answer the riddle of Honnōji (as Fujita Tatsuo describes it in the title of one of his works (*nazo toki, Honnōji no hen* 謎時・本能時の変), we may yet be able to give Akechi Mitsuhide a place amongst the other famed generals of his era. Without question, the time is now for Akechi Mitsuhide.

⁸² Recently discovered by my project advisor, Dr. Shelley Fenno Quinn, is a blog authored by a purported descendant of Akechi Mitsuhide containing discussions on the various theories. It is not only scholars who might shed light on the subject, but an Akechi himself! See Akechi, Kenzaburō, *Honnōji no hen Akechi Kenzaburō teki sekai*, <http://blog.goo.ne.jp/akechikenzaburotekisekai> (accessed 23 May 2010).

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